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The Astronaut

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coming down yellow under the streetlamp,
the sighs curling up over our heads.
I feel real cocky & show Jeannie my catch.
Her forehead crinkles & out of the pocket
of her silver furcoat she pulls a golden
horseshoe key ring with two red jewels
at the tips—you could miss'em.
We stop & stand there in the snow, too afraid
to turn around, listening for the gunshot.
Slowly, oh so slowly, I follow our snowprints
back, clutching the keys in my wet hand.
I open the door. He's at the counter, his back
to me. I say Hey Man, you forgot your keys.
He turns. He smiles—a big white smile.
He takes the keys. He says Hey. Thanks.
He shakes my hand. You Kids are alright.
When I get back they wait for me to
say something. I can't. So Jim says,
I see you still got your nose.

THE ASTRONAUT

You'd think a hero could complete a sentence.
Not this one. I couldn't coax a decent take
out of him. He'd stutter & stare down the mike
like the barrel of a gun. Finally, I told the engineer
to give us an hour & we walked to this Mexican place
where this round brown woman was hosing down
the walk under a tattered green canopy. Inside
we turned down two chairs & she kept an eye
on us through the kitchen slit. She must have
recognized him: butch, caved-in eyes, white shirt,
plastic penholder with 2 bics. He needed to talk.
I needed him calmed down. I listened.

“They send you up but they don’t help you down. Sure,
they drill you up till you can flip those knobs
in your sleep. Underwater, backwards, upside down.
It’s all rehearsed. The only variables are the human element
& the moon dust. I mean we had no clue about the landings.
We could have sunk under an ocean of dust
for all we knew. Think about that. But we didn’t
& the next thing I know Neil is on the ladder
talking poetry. That wasn’t procedure. That’s not the way
we planned it. I was supposed to go down first.
But I was on the horn to Houston & Neil suited up
& grabbed himself a piece of history. It’s God’s truth.
Neil Armstrong took cuts. That One Small Step stuff?
That really floored me. I didn’t know Neil had poetry in him.
I was going to say something like ‘Hello, Mr. Moon!’
The other landing was even worse. We touch down
in the ocean, get quarantined & everything goes cuckoo.
Flashbulbs, confetti & every night a girl
looking at me down the bar. They don’t prep you for that.
Didn’t take me long to hit bottom. But hey,
I can’t complain. I’m off the booze. I see my kids.
I got an agent. He told me I could have doubled
my profit potential if I’d stepped down first.
Nobody remembers who finished second, do they?
But hey. What’s done is done. You can’t change the past.
Naw, go ahead, tell anybody you want. I don’t mind.
He won’t sue me ’cause he knows what the truth is.”

The Astronaut didn’t say much after that but his face
had the look of someone who’d been listened to.
Back in the studio he gave me 4 perfect reads
& left smiling. I swore I’d never use an amateur again.